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Iban Pottery

by

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"……do not grudge
To pick out treasures from an earthen pot……"
George Herbert, 1593-1633.

114 Henry Ling Roth in his classic compilation "The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo" (published in London in 1896,
323 and "based chiefly on the MSS. of the late Hugh Brooke Low")[1] devotes two pages (Vol. 1, pp. 390-391), to pottery. Having previously cited (on p. 381) Brooke Low's observation that "before the arrival of Europeans" the Iban (or Sea Dayaks) had used "earthen *prioks*[2] made by themselves," Ling Roth begins his account with the comment: "There appears to be little or no pottery made by the natives now;" and in evidence of this he quotes a note by the Rev. F. W. Leggatt, an S.P.G. missionary then stationed on the Skrang River, concerning the pottery of the Dayaks of that region. "They tell me here," reported the Rev. Leggatt, "that they do not make pots now for two reasons—firstly, because the proper clay is found only a long distance off, secondly, because Chinese pots are to be bought so cheaply that it is not worth while making pots for themselves."[3]

323 By the 1890's then, pottery was no longer being made by the
184 Sea Dayaks of the Skrang, and (probably) of the other regions of the Second Division, where Government and mission activities had led to changes in technology and economic organization, as in the rest of Dayak culture. Further inland, however, there were other Iban tribes whose members saw much less of Europeans, and most of whose traditional practices were little influenced by the policies of the Brooke regime. In the long-house communities of those remoter regions the art of pottery survived.

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114 During the years 1949 to 1951, while carrying out field
323 research in social anthropology on behalf of the Colonial Social Science Research Council and the Government of Sarawak, I

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chanced to visit a number of the more distant Iban communities of the Third Division where earthenware pots were still being made and used. The main purpose of this present paper is to give an account of the technique of pottery making as my wife and I observed it in an Iban long-house in the head-waters of the Mujong River of the Kapit District.[4]

Early in November, 1949, so that we might witness a set of major rituals (the chief of which were several *gawai kenyalang*, or hornbill rituals) we had travelled to Rumah Tungku (a long-house of 50 apartments) in the lower reaches of the Sungai Tiau, a stream that rises among the grotesque granite peaks of the Hose Mountains and flows away to the south-west to become one of the main tributaries of the Mujong. Soon after our arrival, while making a census of the families of Rumah Tungku, we noticed that many of the apartments contained stocks of earthenware pots. Blackened by soot, they stood in racks above the elevated cooking hearth (*dapur*) of the apartment, or hung in rotan casings from the hearth's side-posts. When we asked about them we were told that all the pots we had seen had been made by women of Rumah Tungku from local clays and by traditional Iban methods. In several parts of the Baleh region we had come across other long-houses where pots of Iban make were being used, but nowhere had we seen as many *priok tanah* as at Rumah Tungku.

Clearly pottery making was a flourishing local industry, and we resolved to find out what we could about it as soon as the *gawai* we had come to observe and study were at an end.

By Friday, 25th November, even the most elaborate of the *gawai* had been over for several days. Life in the long-house was gradually returning to normal and routine domestic tasks that had been pushed to one side because of preoccupation with ritual matters of high importance were slowly being taken up again. So it was that on the morning of that Friday we came across old Runin, seated on a mat at the edge of her section of the great gallery (*ruai*) of the long-house, making a clay pot. Here was the opportunity we had been hoping for: we sat down beside her and watched.

During the previous weeks we had seen a good deal of Runin. She was a charming old lady, full of good humour, and possessing an expert knowledge of the part Iban women play in *gawai*

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rituals—which was how we had come to know her. When we told her that we would very much like to learn something about the Iban way of making earthenware pots she said she would be glad to help us, and she agreed that the next day we should follow the making of a pot from the gathering of the clay onwards.

In 1949, Runin was a widow of about 65 years. She had been born in a long-house of the Sungai Ngemah, to which river her ancestors had migrated from the headwaters of the Batang Ai, and she had been living in the Sungai Tiau since about 1923, a year after the Baleh region was re-opened to settlement following the quelling of Iban rebels in the Rejang, the Mujong and the Gat.[5] At 65, Runin stood at the head of a *bilek* family of seven members. Her greatest delight in life was Tukang, aged 3, her grandson.[6] Tukang was the son of Demai (aged 25 years) the daughter of Runin's deceased sister Payah, and Demai it was who was deputed by Runin to go, the next day, and collect the clay for the making of further pots. Demai called in, as a helper, Inyan, aged 14 years, the granddaughter of Runin's sister-in-law, Irin, who lived in a neighbouring apartment of the long-house.

Soon after ten o'clock the next morning (26th November, 1949), Demai and Inyan came to tell us that they were ready to go and dig for clay. They had with them two long-bladed knives (*duku*) and two circular baskets (*lekit*) lined with freshly plucked banana leaves (*daun pisang*). The spot where Demai hoped to find suitable clay was on the western bank of the Tiau River just opposite the long-house. Other women of the long-house, she said, had made pots with clay from this source, but never Runin, who usually obtained her supplies from deposits further inland, now cut off by the flooded river.

Because the Tiau was in flood we had to make the crossing to the western bank by canoe (*prau*). Within a few minutes Demai had located a narrow seam of clay just above the level of the swollen river. After testing a piece of the clay by pressing it between her fingers she announced that it would do, and after an admonitary word to Inyan and ourselves she commenced to dig. (Plate 1).*

Her admonition was a strange one. Before setting out from the long-house Demai had solemnly warned us of a taboo (*pemali*)

*Plate numbers referred to by Dr. Freeman are cross-indexed to S.M.J. sequence at p.174, q.v.

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323 784 that had to be observed during the whole of the time that the pots were being made—from the first gathering of the clay to the completion of firing. It was vitally important, she said, that all persons having anything to do with the making of the pots should at no stage, when they were handling or dealing with the clay or the partially made pots, emit wind.

323 784 811 Such prohibitions as this are called by the Iban *pemali*, and this particular prohibition against the emission of wind (*pemali kentuat*), like many other Iban *pemali*, is an instance of homoeopathic magic. In the judgement of the Iban there is a clearly recognizable similarity between the noise that a person makes when emitting wind and the noise that a pot makes when it bursts in the course of firing. Further, the Iban believe that if someone engaged in the making of pots should happen, while so doing, to emit wind—even though involuntarily—that this occurrence is liable to result in the bursting of one or more of the pots when, later, they come to be fired. In short, the logic of the belief is (as Sir James Fraser has phrased it) "that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause."[7]

784 183 688 783 Among the Iban there are very many such magical prohibitions, and they are associated with virtually every kind of important ritual or economic activity. Furthermore, many *pemali* are so widely known and so firmly established that they can be said to be part of Iban custom, or *adat*, and there are some *pemali* the transgression of which involves a stipulated form of expiation (i.e. by the sacrifice of a fowl or pig) and the payment of a fine to the persons whose interests have been affected. In the case of the prohibition under discussion however, there was no such specific penalty, and no one we asked had heard of action being taken against anyone because of its violation. It was a rule of conduct which everyone—apparently—obeyed.

317 323 The seam of clay that Demai had selected was narrow and uneven. As she worked she examined each handful with care. She was primarily interested in making an estimate of the plasticity of the clay she was collecting, and so each piece as she gathered it was fingered for a few moments to ensure that it was sufficiently *liat* (plastic). Any clay that did not reach the standard she had set was at once rejected. As Demai's standards were exacting and the seam of clay poor (much of it being intermixed

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(1) The gathering of the clay (Iban pot-making).

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(2) Clay being laid out in the sun (Iban pot-making).

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Plate XIII

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(3). Dried and pounded clay being sieved.

(4). Sieved clay being mixed with water prior to kneading.

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(5) Kneaded clay being pounded in preparation for modelling.

(6) The commencement of modelling: the top of a cylinder of prepared clay is flattened out.

(7) A ring of cane is inserted in the top of the cylinder.

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[p. 156c]

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Plate XV

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(8) The hollowing out of the body with an Anvil Stone begins. (Iban pot-making)

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(9) Modelling with an Anvil Stone and Beater in progress.

(10) Towards the end of the modelling process.

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with small stones) the process was a slow one: to collect about one *gantang* (gallon) of useable clay took 45 minutes. This amount, said Demai, would be enough for about five or six pots.

When we arrived back at the long-house Runin was busily occupied putting cotton on to a tying-frame (*tangga ajan*)—one of the most complicated processes in the technique of *ikat* weaving. Unable to attend to the task herself she instructed Demai to go on with the next stage in the handling of the clay: the sunning of it. Demai took a small mat (of the kind known as *tikai sengang*) and laid it out on that section of the *tanju*, or open platform of the long-house that belonged to Runin's apartment. Then, from the pile of clay she had collected in her basket she broke off small lumps—each about the size of a hen's egg—and laid them in rows on the mat. (Plate 2). It was by now mid-day. For the rest of that day and during the following morning the pieces of clay were left out in the full heat of the sun. The purpose of this, said Runin, was to dry the clay thoroughly, ready for the next process of pounding and sieving.

The clay laid out to sun, we returned with Demai to Runin's apartment. Soon after we had sat down Mut, aged 18, the son of Runin's deceased sister Giram and a member of Runin's *bilek* family, strode in. He had in his hands several cobs of corn (*Zea mays*) which, so it appeared, he was intending to roast in the embers of the fire that was burning on the family hearth. Drying on a rack above this hearth were the two pots that Runin had made the previous day. As soon as she realized what he was about Runin called to him in an agitated voice to go to some other apartment to roast his corn, giving as her reason: *"Takut priok aku blah"* ("For fear that my earthenware pots should burst.") Mut gave a grin of understanding and at once left—carrying his corn. Here we have another prohibition (*pemali lingkau*) closely resembling that already mentioned. When corn is roasted those seeds which are exposed to the full heat of the fire often explode with distinctly audible 'pops.' It is the belief of the Iban that corn roasted in this way in close proximity to unfired clay pots may result in those pots exploding when in due course they come to be fired. Similarly, there is a prohibition (*pemali getah*) against the use of damar gum in the vicinity of partially completed pots for the same reason that damar—an ancient form of illumination among the Iban—splutters and explodes as it burns.

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323 412 Soon after one o'clock on the next day, 27th November, Runin began with the preparation of the clay that Demai had collected. All of the pieces of clay (which by then had been drying in the sun for about nine hours) were gathered up into a basket and carried into the gallery of the long-house to be pounded and sieved. The pounding was done in the large wooden mortar (*lesong*)—normally used in the husking of *padi*—which, as is the normal practice in Iban long-houses, stood on a section of the gallery (known as the *tempuan lesong*) just outside Runin's *bilek*. Portion by portion all of the clay was pounded with long, hard-wood poles (*alu*) wielded by Runin and Inyan; the pounding of each portion lasting for about 40 seconds. The pounded clay was then taken handful by handful and passed through a sieve into a large wooded trough (*dulang*). (Plate 3). This sieve (*pengayak*) which was made from *rotan* had a very fine mesh so that only well-powdered clay was able to pass through it. About half a pint of pounded clay was sieved at a time, Runin moving the sieve with a rapid rotary motion in an anti-clockwise direction. Each time about one third of the pounded clay failed to pass through the sieve and was rejected. Runin referred to this rejected 'clay' as '*batu iya*,' lit. 'stones of it,' and to the 'clay' that passed through the sieve as '*isi iya*,' lit. 'flesh of it.' The first pounding and sieving took seventeen minutes. The sieved clay was then passed through the same sieve a second and third time (taking an additional six minutes), until it was thoroughly refined and had reached a consistency about that of coarse flour. There was now in the wooden trough about five pints of finely powdered clay, light grey in colour.

323 Next, Runin stirred up the powdered clay several times so that it became well mixed with air. She then began pouring into the trough (from a gourd) cold water that had been drawn earlier that day from the Tiau River. The water was added little by little, with pauses during which Runin mixed the water into the clay with her hands. (Plate 4). In all, about one and a half pints of water were added, and about one quarter of a pint at a time. There was, however, no hint of formal measurement on Runin's part; everything she did—as at all other stages—was done by spontaneous judgement based, obviously, on long years of experience.

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Once the water had been thoroughly mixed with the clay, kneading began. This kneading (*merok*) was done vigorously, with both hands, and continued for some ten minutes. At the end of this time the mass of clay was divided into five lumps of about equal size, and each lump was rolled into a cylindrical shape about five inches in length by two inches in diameter. These cylinders of kneaded clay were termed *timpan* by Runin, and she remarked that each of them would make one pot.

The most important stage in the preparation of the clay (according to Runin) then followed. Taking one of the cylinders, or *timpan*, Runin placed it on a large, flat-topped, river boulder, and commenced to pound (*nutok*) the clay with a heavy pestle. (Plate 5). The pestle (*alu*) was of hard-wood and 2 ft. 6 ins. in length by two inches in diameter. Runin grasped it in her right hand and pounded the small piece of clay with force, at the rate of about 60 to 70 strokes a minute, while with her unengaged left hand she periodically pushed pieces of flattened clay back under the pestle. Pounding clay in this way is strenuous work, for as the clay stiffens the pestle tends to stick to it. Runin several times complained that her arm was aching, but she continued pounding the same small lump of clay (with occasional brief pauses) for just over twenty minutes. At the end of this time the consistency of the clay had changed greatly: it was now firm, but pliable to the touch, like plasticine of the best quality.

Runin explained to us that the purpose of the pounding was to give the clay plasticity (*mri iya liat*). In other words, not until the clay had become tempered by prolonged pounding was it in a fit condition for modelling. And later she remarked that if the clay were not thoroughly pounded it would not 'hold together' after modelling, and the pot from which it was made would be liable to burst when it was fired ("*Enti enda nutok, tempa enggai rapit, ka blah*"). This, it should be noted, is recognition that pots may burst for technical as well as for mystical reasons. And here let me interpose the general observation that the credence which the Iban give to their magical prohibitions, or *pemali*, does not result in any lessening of concern with technical considerations—as far as they are understood. Only where technology fails does magic rule. This, obviously enough, is a point of some importance in the proper understanding of the role of magic in Iban culture.

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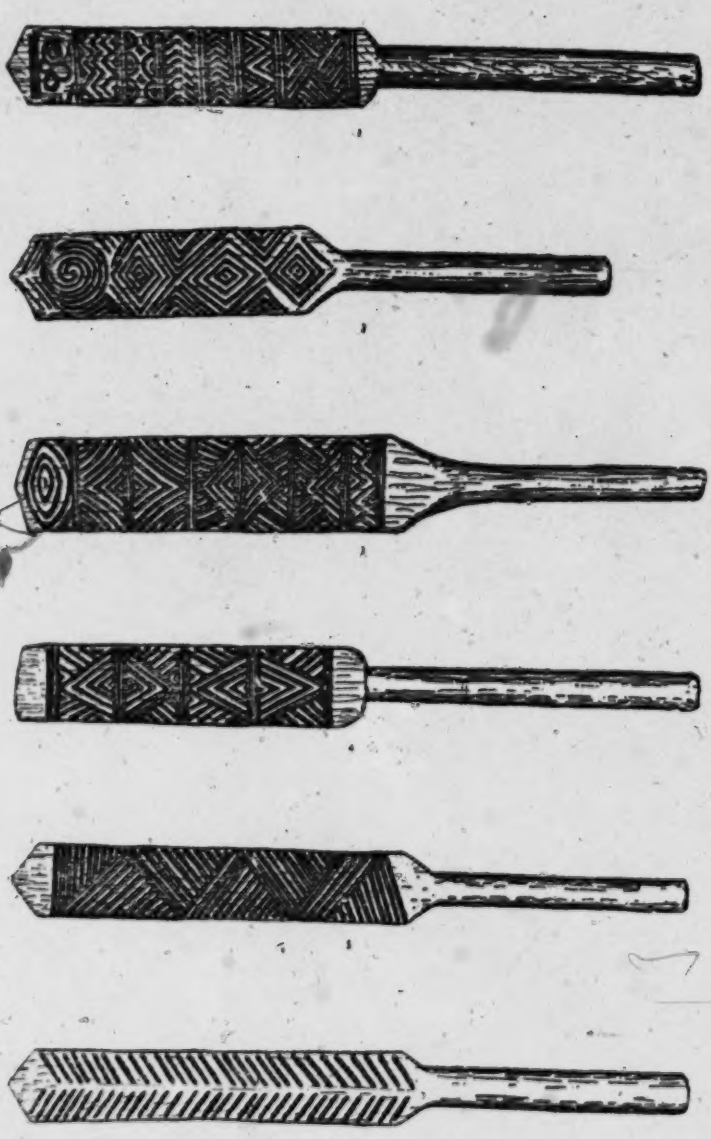

Wooden beaters (*penimba*) .....
(Nos. 1—6)

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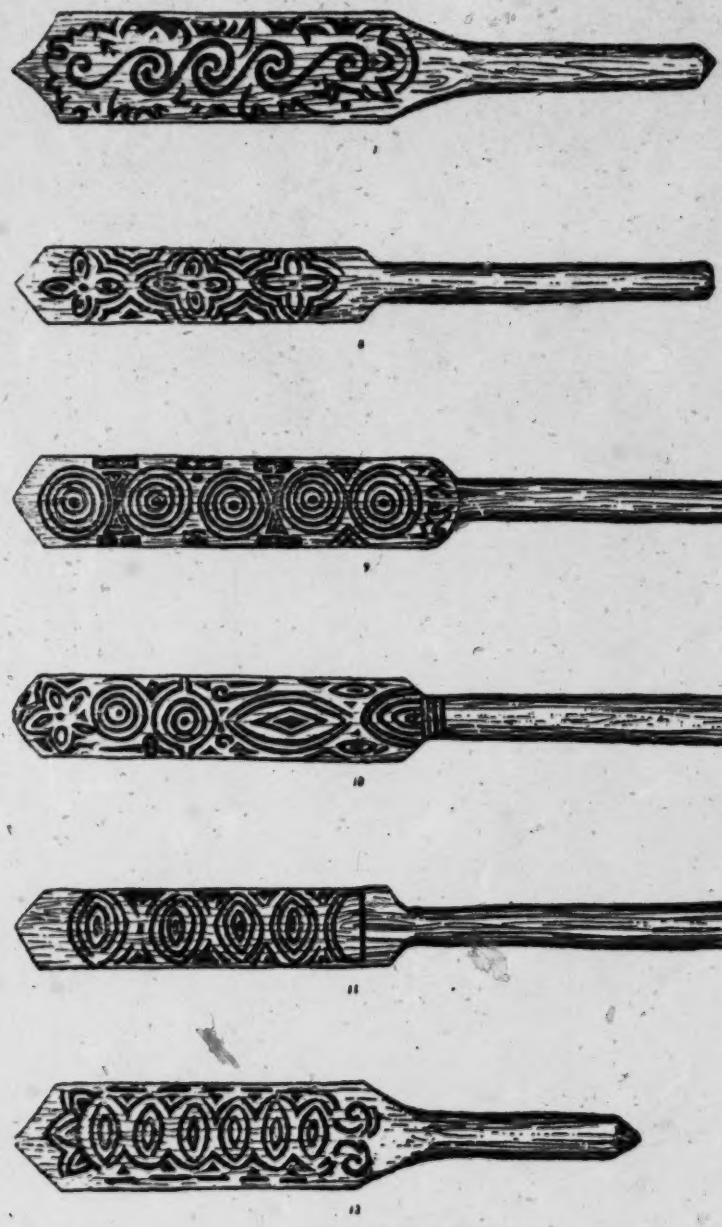

. . . . . used in Iban pot-making
(Nos. 7—12)

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323 Runin (assisted by Inyan) went on with the pounding until all five *timpan* were completed and put to one side in a cool place for the modelling that was to begin the next day.

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323 412 The modelling of the pots began on the afternoon of Monday, 28th November, 1949. The main tools in Runin's work kit were three stones and three wooden beaters. The stones were all ovaloid, smooth of surface and of very regular shape, their principal dimensions being: 3ins. × 2¾ins., 2½ins. × 2¼ins. and 2ins. × 1¼ins. All were of natural origin and unworked, having been found some years before in the bed of a near-by river. When a pot is being fashioned one of these stones is held inside the forming vessel to provide a hard, smooth and gently curved base against which the soft clay of the sides is modelled into shape by repeated tappings with a wooden beater. They may, therefore, be called anvil stones.

The wooden beaters used in pottery making are called, by the Iban, *penimba*. In other parts of Borneo, as among the Murut of the upper Trusan,[8] such beaters are made with paddle-shaped blades. In contrast, all of the Iban beaters I have seen have had long and narrow blades with parallel sides. For example, a typical *penimba* (from Rumah Tungku) had an overall length of 13 ins. made up of a blade 7½ ins. in length, 1½ ins. in width and ½ in. in thickness, narrowing to a rounded handle 5½ ins. long and ¾ in. in diameter.

323 412 531 Furthermore, Iban pottery beaters are distinguished in another important way: while one side of a beater commonly has a surface of plain, polished wood, the other usually carries an incised design often of some complexity. These designs, interestingly enough, have two different uses, one technical and the other aesthetic. Let me deal first with the technical use. In the modelling of a pot one side of the beater is employed and then the other, beginning with the side that bears the design. Now the design is deeply incised in the surface of the beater so that with each blow it becomes clearly impressed in the soft clay and this has the effect of splaying out the clay into numerous tiny ridges and depressions. The beater is then reversed and the plain side of it is used to flatten out the imprinted design into a smooth surface again. In this way by the alternate use of the incised and flat

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blades of the beater the wall becomes progressively thinner and the pot is gradually modelled into shape. The final shaping of the pot is always done with the smooth face of the beater, after which the pot is put to one side for a few minutes to dry.

The pot is then ready to be decorated. One of the beaters is selected (a potter usually has a small collection of them from which to choose), and the incisions carved in it cleaned out with the blade of a knife. The pot is then taken up, an anvil stone held within it, and the patterned blade of the beater gently but firmly tapped over the entire outer suface of the pot—except for its concave neck and lip. A completed pot is thus covered, from its neck down, with an over-all pattern made up of a series of slightly over-lapping impressions of the designs of the beater. This patterning is often very pleasing and there is justification for describing Iban pottery as a decorated ware.

The carving of the design on the pottery beater, which is normally the work of a man, is done with a narrow-bladed, long-handled knife called a *lungga*, and it is interesting to observe that in a number of cases the carving of the beater becomes an end in itself, and ornamental details are added to the top of the handle and the base of the blade—positions from which no impressions could be imparted to the wall of a pot.

Pages 160 and 161 illustrate twelve of the pottery beaters, or *penimba*, which were being used by the women of Rumah Tungku in 1949, and indicate the kinds of decoration which were to be found on their pots.[9] It will be seen that the range in design is considerable—from the simple, oblique lines to linked spirals (so typical of Iban art). It should perhaps be added that none of the motifs used have any special meaning: they are parts of pure designs and used for decorative purposes only.

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We may now return to Rumah Tungku on the afternoon of Monday, 28th November, 1949, for a more detailed description of the modelling of an Iban pot. Runin seated herself on a small mat at the inner edge of the *tanju*, her legs stretched out before her. Across her lap she spread an old hand-woven skirt (*kain chelum*) to make a surface on which to work. From the wooden

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323 trough in which they were lying she then took up one of the cylindrical lumps of prepared clay (*timpan*) in her left hand and resting it on her left thigh patted the end of the lump with the smooth side of her beater, until it had increased from 2 ins. to 4½ ins. in diameter. (Plate 6).

From a pile of them lying at her side she then selected a ring (*simpai*) 4 ins. in diameter[10] made from a thin strip of rotan.[11] After moistening it she placed this ring in the centre of of the flattened top of the *timpan* (Plate 7), and then carefully rolled the outer rim of clay over it until the ring had become completely embedded. This is an important step in the making of an Iban *priok*, for it is this ring of cane that defines the circumference of the lip of the vessel and guides the potter in her attempt to achieve as perfect a degree of roundness as she can in the body of the pot.

The ring in place, Runin picked up the largest of her anvil stones and plunged it several times into the centre of the cylinder of clay to make a small hollow. (Plate 8). This hollow she then extended in size until it was large enough to accomodate an anvil stone held in the extended fingers of her left hand.

The modelling proper was then ready to begin. It was completed in four stages—all five pots being brought to the end of one stage before the next was embarked upon.

Stage 1: The hollowed out lump of clay (with the ring in place) was laid across Runin's thighs with its opening towards her left hand. Holding the anvil stone in the hollow she had just made, she began to strike the outside wall with the incised surface of her beater against the stone beneath. (Plate 9). As she did this she slowly rotated the body of the pot by regular upward movements of her legs, aided by a slight twisting movement of her left hand. This continued for about two minutes until the pot had been very roughly shaped.[12] It was then placed in the sun to dry (base upwards), while Runin dealt similarly with the other four *timpan*.

Stage 2: During the second stage (using the same methods) the five pots were merely increased in size a little and made slightly more spherical.

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Stage 3: With the third stage came the modelling of the neck of the pot (this being done not with the blade but with the rounded handle of one of the beaters), and the filling out of the body of the pot into a fully rounded shape. The modelling had now become a delicate and intricate process. At the outset (i.e. during Stage 1) Runin had struck the wall of the pot rapidly and with force, but she was now tapping it quite gently and in a slow and measured way. The tapping, it should be remarked, was always down the side of the pot from neck to base, a distance of some six inches covered in eight taps at the rate of about two per second; and as the beater was moved down the other wall the anvil stone was moved down inside the pot immediately beneath the beater and at the same speed. (Plate 10). Again, the pot was now rotated with much greater care, that is about an inch at a time, there being about 17 sets of downward tappings (as just described) to one complete revolution of the pot in about one and a half minutes. After Runin had achieved all that she could by these methods the pot was turned base uppermost so that any imperfections in its shape could be corrected by very light tappings with the plain side of the beater. This was the end of Stage 3; the modelling was now completed and the pot, with an entirely smooth surface, was ready to be decorated.

Stage 4: This last stage began with the decoration of the pot, an over-all, impressed pattern being imparted to its outer surface with the incised face of a beater in the manner already described. This was followed by the removal of the cane ring that had been in place throughout the modelling process. With the blade of a knife Runin made an incision just below the ring, and lifted it clear. The rough edge that remained was sliced down until it became level and was then formed into a rounded lip by Runin's moistened fingers.

The modelling of the five pots had taken Runin about two and three-quarter hours. They were then taken indoors and placed in a rack above the cooking hearth (*dapur*) of Runin's *bilek* so that they might dry out ready for firing.

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Eleven days after the modelling had been completed the pots were—according to Runin—dry enough and ready for the fire. The firewood had been gathered the previous day and was lying

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stacked on the terraced bank of the Tiau River about sixty yards from the long-house. At a few minutes after eleven o'clock on the morning of 9th December, 1949, Runin began to construct the simple fire in which her pots were to be baked. The pieces of wood she had gathered averaged about a yard in length and were about as thick as a man's wrist. By stacking these pieces at right angles one to the other and interlocking them, she soon built up a box-like structure about three feet square and some two feet in height. On the top of this the five pots were placed (base down), and then firmly secured with side pieces (Plate 11).

At 11.20 a.m. several burning brands which Inyan had carried down from the long-house were thrust under the bonfire. The wood soon caught and smoke began to rise. Inyan at once handed to Runin a frond of fern, of the kind known to the Iban as *paku ikan*, which she had plucked hastily from the nearby river bank. Grasping the fern frond in her right hand Runin waved it several times over the pots and the burning fire,[13] uttering as she did so a short prayer (*sampi*): (Plate 12)

Nya kami nemu orang parai tadi,
Parai kamari;
Kami nemu orang parai pagila,
Parai lusa.
Ngambi ka enda tekerban,
Enda tejelungan;
Ngambi ka enda buya,
Enda ampa.

There, so we have taken account of those who have died to-day,
Those who died yesterday;
Taken account of those who may die tomorrow,
And on the day after.
May this our undertaking be not fruitless,
Be not a failure;
May it not miscarry,
Or become worthless—like the chaff of *padi*.

For those unacquainted with Iban eschatology this prayer needs a word of explanation. Whenever a member of a long-house dies, Iban custom requires that all the other members of

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[p 166a]

(11) The pots in place ready for firing.

(12) A prayer is uttered over the pots and fire.

(13) The tempering fluid being prepared.

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(14) Towards the end of the firing.

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(15) A pot is plunged into the tempering fluid

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Plate XVIII

(16) A pot being dried on the embers after tempering.

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(17) A completed Iban jar

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323 782 784 688 the community should observe, for a period, prohibitions on certain mundane activities. The transgression of any of these prohibitions usually results in the guilty person being fined by the mourning kinsmen, and—so say the Iban—in his affairs being blighted by a supernatural curse. Runin's prayer was aimed at forestalling such troubles. Addressing the world at large (and especially the spirit world) she voiced her assurance that she had taken into account all of those recently dead, even though she may have not heard of their deaths; and similarly, she mentioned all those who might die the next day or the day after.[14] Thus, in the words of her prayer, she was placating the spirits of the dead, so ensuring that they would not put a curse on the firing of her pots turning the event into a fiasco.

323 [291] Her prayer uttered, Runin at once set about attending to the fire. More kindling was thrust in at the base, and then fanned vigorously with a large circular sun hat (*tanggi*). It was evident that Runin placed great importance on getting the fire burning evenly and well. Next she began to build up firewood around and over the pots until they were covered to a thickness of four or five inches.

After about ten minutes the fire had taken and was burning fiercely, tongues of flame a yard or so in height leaping up at the sides. Several of these flames played on the outer edges of the pots before they had become properly heated from beneath. At once portions of the lips of these pots began to break away with quite loud detonations. At this Runin made no comment, but she looked clearly disturbed.

[824] Thenceforward, she paid no further attention to the fire, turning instead to the mixing of the tempering fluid in which the fired pots were, later, to be dipped. The raw material from which this fluid was made was the bark of a tree known to the Iban as *samak*. The bark had been collected the day previously by Repai, a kinsman of Runin, at the same time as he had been cutting bark for his wife.[15] Repai had delivered the bark to Runin in strips measuring about 15 ins. × 4 ins. These Runin had cut into chips and pounded in an ordinary *padi* mortar (*lesong*) about an hour before the firing began. While the fire blazed Runin set about making an infusion from the pounded bark. About a gallon of river water was poured into a large iron cooking dish (*kali*) of

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323 Chinese make, and into this was stirred somewhat over half a gallon of pounded *samak* bark. After the bark had been allowed to soak for ten minutes or so Runin took the bark handful by handful, squeezing it in her hands, so expressing from it all the liquid she could. (Plate 13). The tempering fluid soon became a rich, dark brown in colour.

Meanwhile, the fire was blazing fiercely. After about forty minutes it began to settle and the pots to sink down into the ashes under the weight of the wood still resting upon them. It was now at its highest temperature, and all of the pots had reached a glowing red heat. All breakage had ceased. Fifteen minutes later the last of the wood above the pots had burnt away, and they lay exposed in the embers. (Plate 14). At 12.20 a.m. (just exactly one hour after the lighting of the fire) Runin removed the first of the pots by lifting it on the end of a stick (about a yard in length), carried it across an intervening space, and sank it into the tempering fluid which she had prepared. (Plate 15). The pot was still very hot and as it was immersed the fluid sizzled and spluttered and gave off clouds of steam. At the time of this first immersion we observed that the tempering fluid permeated right through the sides of the pot, and it is this—so the Iban claim—that helps to make their *priok* impermeable to water.

After about twenty-five seconds in the tempering fluid the pot was removed and placed on the earth nearby. Then, again on the end of the same stick, it was returned to the fire to dry, being turned in the ashes for about one minute. (Plate 16). With this the process of manufacture was at an end.

* * *

The firing I have just described could not be called a success. Of the five pots only one had come through unscathed. The four others had all suffered and in the same way: while the bodies were free from defects the lips and necks (as can be seen in Plate 16) had broken away badly. All four were only fit for throwing away.

323 152 811 It is perhaps of interest to consider the reasons advanced by the Iban themselves for the breakages that had occurred. Runin was greatly upset by what had happened, and she enjoined all those present to keep their silence lest the story of what had

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happened should spread throughout the long-house bringing her shame (*malu*). The breakages—as soon as she could bring herself to speak of the matter—she vehemently attributed to the poor quality of the clay (*tanah jai*, lit., bad clay) from which she had modelled the pots. Punai (from the neighbouring *bilek*) suggested that the pots had been dried for too long (i.e. above Runin's hearth) before firing. Irin (Runin's sister-in-law) and Bagop (the son of Runin's deceased sister) were both of the opinion that someone must have emitted wind, while the clay was being collected; they added that even if this had happened without audible noise it was still enough to cause breakages during firing. Runin immediately took up this theory and developed it: the deposit of clay in question, being directly opposite the long-house, was much used; beyond doubt, she argued, many others must have emitted wind while gathering it, and so the deposit as a whole had become tainted and worthless. With clay gathered from further inland (near her *padi* farm), which had not been put to such promiscuous use Runin went on, she had never had any failures. ("*Enda kala suba*," she averred, "Never before has this kind of thing happened").

Here (it may be noted in passing) we have a good example of the way in which the Iban system of magical prohibitions, or *pemali*, is used to account for and explain technical and human shortcomings. The bursting of the pots (to take the example at hand) is seen as evidence of the validity of the taboo, and on the presumption that the taboo has been broken the individual to whose activities it refers is absolved from blame. In this way a system of magical prohibitions performs an important social function, for by attributing blameworthy actions to mystical agency the individuals who have committed them are freed from responsibility, discord is avoided and the composure of the group preserved.

Her self-esteem restored, Runin went on to remark that, in general, breakages during firing were rare. Just how accurate this claim is I am unable definitely to say, for during my stay in Sarawak I did not witness another firing of pots. However, my impression, from the enquiries and observations that I did make, is that with the Iban technique of firing breakages must be not uncommon.

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323 The firing of pots even under an advanced technology is not without hazard, for there are many things that can go wrong.[16] The Iban method could scarcely be more rudimentary, and I think it likely that Runin's assertion that breakages very seldom occur was no more than a face-saving exaggeration made under the stress of her disappointment at what—alas—had happened. Passers-by who asked about the outcome of the firing evinced no surprise when told that only one of the five pots had escaped breakage. Moreover, the fact that several much discussed *pemali* are associated with the firing of pots also suggests that it is, in truth, an uncertain venture.

It would seem that such breakages as do occur under the Iban method of firing are generally the result of blowing (i.e. bursting from too rapid heating) rather than dunting (i.e. the cracking of pots whilst cooling).[17] This, certainly, was the case in the firing under discussion. The four pots that suffered breakage were those at the corners of the fire (see Plate 11), and the bursting that did occur happened early in the firing when flames lept up from the base of the fire to play fiercely on the rims of the otherwise unheated pots.[18] As soon as the pots became thoroughly heated all breakage ceased. Again, there was no dunting as the pots cooled in the dying embers of the fire, nor did tempering cause any visible damage.

* * *

323 531 Plate 17 shows the one pot modelled by Runin which did come successfully through the firing. It is a typical example of Iban ware, and illustrates its style and main characteristics. All the Iban pots I have seen possess this same globe-like shape. The colour of the finished pot is black, this hue being imparted during the firing by smoking; it is no more than a surface covering, however, and after a time (unless the pot is re-exposed to smoke and flame) the black skin flakes away to reveal a dun-coloured clay body beneath. It will be seen that the impressed decoration covers the entire outer surface of the pot, except for the neck and lip. All of the *priok tanah* we saw in the Baleh region possessed decoration of this same general kind; and indeed, it is this feature, more than anything else, which characterizes Iban pots.

323 The pot illustrated has a diameter at its widest point of 7¼ ins., while the diameter of its mouth (i.e. distance between the

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inner edges of its lip) is 4 ins.[19] This makes it a vessel of about average size. Considerably large pots are to be found however. At Rumah Tungku, for example, we discovered one pot with a widest diameter of 12½ ins., and a diameter at its mouth of 6½ ins. This pot was kept for a special purpose: the boiling of certain of the mordants with which cotton (in the *ikat* technique of the Iban) is treated. It had been made by a woman of Rumah Tungku named Binyong. In 1949, Binyong was about 58 years of age. She had made the pot many years before when carrying her eldest child Muli. Muli, in 1949, was a mature man with two children of his own, and we estimated that Binyong's large *priok* must have been at least 35 years old. It was still in excellent condition.

323 ● [386]

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At the beginning of this paper I quoted evidence to show that as early as the 1890's the craft of pottery had become defunct among the Sea Dayaks of the Skrang River. Yet in 1949, the making of pots was still an active industry among the people of Rumah Tungku, as in various other Iban communities of the Baleh region. What were the circumstances which had brought this survival of an ancient craft into the mid-twentieth century?

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First, obviously, there is the fact that in 1949 the Baleh was still a region where almost all of traditional Iban culture was extant. By 1949, true enough, there had been a number of innovations both in technology and economic arrangements, but these were still not on sufficient a scale to subvert the traditional Iban way of life. The majority of the men wore their hair in long tresses, were tattooed and clad in loin-clothes; while, ordinarily, the only garment of the women was a hand-woven skirt of their own making. But most important of all, the Baleh Iban were still pagan, adhering zealously to the elaborate system of activities and beliefs that constitute Iban religion. In short, the traditional Iban way of doing things was still valued above all else. Fundamentally, therefore, the problem of the survival of Iban pottery is but part of the wider problem of the survival of Iban culture in general. This is a major historical and cultural question which I do not propose to attempt to deal with here; there are, however, several specific circumstances which have intimately affected the survival of pottery, and these, I think, should perhaps be mentioned.

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323 177 178 462 First, the craft of pottery (except for the carving of the wooden beaters) is entirely in the hands of women. The existence of this division of labour is important, because, among the Iban, the women are markedly more conservative and tradition-bound than are the men. Because of the custom of *bejalai*[20] (the undertaking of journeys for material gain and social prestige), almost all Iban men acquire considerable experience of the outside world, as, for example, by working for a timber company in the Rejang delta or on the oil-fields of Brunei. It is through these sophisticated and travelled men that new ideas and values are introduced into Iban communities. The women, on the other hand, are 'stay-at-homes,' whose experience is limited (but for a very occasional visit to the local trading bazaar) to their own and neighbouring long-houses. These are the women who cling—so much more tenaciously than the men—to traditional ways of thought and action. It is understandable, therefore, that the crafts which are wholly in the hands of women, such as *ikat* weaving, basketry and pottery, are well preserved.

323 415 But there are also more particular reasons that account for the fact that earthenware pots are still being made by Iban women—although recepticles of brass, iron and aluminium can be purchased without difficulty in bazaars such as Kapit. The fact is that, for certain purposes, earthenware pots of Iban make are *preferred* to pots made from metal. The issue here is the utility which *priok tanah* have for the Iban, and it is important to note that this utility is not defined in purely monetary terms. That is, Iban preferences are not determined by the fact that other kinds of cooking vessels can be obtained 'more cheaply' than their own, but that for some purposes in the present estimation of the Iban of the Tiau their own *priok tanah* possess qualities not to be found elsewhere.[21] For example, it is recognized that certain kinds of [252] foods (such as some of the relishes, or *enkayu*, which the Iban eat with their rice) taste much the best if they are cooked in an Iban earthenware pot.[22] Thus, Uyang, a middle-aged man of Rumah Tungku, while standing and watching Runin modelling one of her pots, remarked quite spontaneously: *"Nyamai enkayu mandok alam priok tanah; manis, nadai bau lang."* ("How delicious are relishes cooked in an earthenware pot; they are sweet and without unpalatable taste.") We later found that Uyang had expressed a quite general opinion.

323 796 Finally, let me mention again those pots (such as the large pot made by Binyong of Rumah Tungku) which are used for the

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preparation of mordants during the course of *gawai ubong*. A *gawai ubong* (lit. cotton ceremony) which is a protracted and complex ritual (involving the invocation of goddesses and 'familiars,' and the performance of sacrificial and magical rites) is of high importance in the lives of Iban women, for among women skill at *ikat* weaving determines status, as does prowess in warfare and head-hunting among the men. Moreover, a *gawai ubong* (the only *gawai* which is organized solely by women) is looked upon as the most crucial of all the stages in the whole *jkat* process: then it is that the old and expert weavers of the community call upon their celestial 'helpers' (*antu nulong*) and, in an atmosphere of intense emotion, take charge of the application of the mordants to the cotton of all the younger participants.

It is of significance, I think, that specially made earthenware pots are brought into use on these occasions. In other words, like the *ikat* technique itself (which produces fabrics of such resplendent beauty), the art of making earthenware pots is part of an ancient tradition that the Iban women of the Sungai Tiau still deeply cherish and strongly sustain. May that tradition long survive.

Notes on the Photographic Plates.

1. Demai gathering clay from the bank of the Tiau River. (plate XII a).
2. Demai squatting on the *tanju* of Rumah Tungku and laying out the freshly gathered clay in lumps to dry. (XII b).
3. Runin, at the inner edge of the *tanju*, refining the pounded clay by sieving it into a wooden trough. (XIII a).
4. Runin pouring water from a gourd into a wooden trough and beginning to knead the powdered clay which has been refined by sieving; her grandson, Tukang, is clinging to her back. (XIII b).
5. Runin pounding the clay (which has been mixed with water, kneaded and divided into lumps) on a boulder; the remaining lumps of clay can be seen lying in the trough. (XIV a).
6. Modelling begins: the top of a cylinder of clay is beaten out with the smooth face of a beater to make it large enough for the insertion of a *simpai*, the cane ring that defines the lip of the pot to be; anvil stones can be seen lying on each side of Runin's legs, which are covered with an old, hand-woven skirt. (XIV b).

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323 7. A ring of cane is placed on the flattened top of a cylinder of clay ready to be embedded within it; to Runin's right can be seen three beaters (*penimba*) and four more cane rings (*simpai*). (XIV c).

8. An anvil stone is plunged into the centre of a cylinder of clay (in which a cane ring has been embedded) to hollow it out. (XV a).

9. An anvil stone (grasped in the left hand) is held within the hollowed out cylinder of clay, while the outer wall (immediately over the anvil stone) is struck with the incised surface of a beater; so a pot begins to take shape. (XV b).

10. The modelling of a pot is being completed; it will be seen that the plain side of the beater is being used and that the pot has a smooth surface; the next stage is the decoration of the pot (by using the incised face of the beater) and the finishing off of its neck and lip. (XV c).

11. The five pots modelled by Runin eleven days previously standing in place ready to be fired. (XVI a).

12. The fire has just been lit and Runin, standing over it, is uttering a placatory prayer; in the background can be seen the wood that will be piled on top of the pots as soon as the fire is burning well. (XVI b).

13. Runin making an infusion (to be used as a tempering fluid) from the pounded bark of the *samak* tree; for the purpose she is using an iron cooking bowl (*kali*) of Chinese manufacture; the Tiau River can be seen in the background; Runin's face is distended by a quid of betel. (XVI c).

14. After burning for about fifty minutes the fire has subsided; the five pots can be seen lying among the embers; the lip of the nearest pot, it will be observed, has broken away. (XVII a).

15. A pot, immediately after removal from the embers of the fire, is plunged into the tempering fluid—an infusion made from the bark of the *samak* tree. (XVII b).

16. After having been immersed in tempering fluid for about a quarter of a minute each pot is returned and held on the burning embers for about a minute; it will be seen that only one pot (to the immediate left of Runin) has come through

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the fire without serious blemish: this is the pot shown in the next plate. (XVIII). 323

17. A completed pot; the dimensions of this pot are: height 6¼ ins., diameter at widest point 7¼ ins., diameter at mouth 4 ins., thickness of wall ⅛ in. (XIX).

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Notes to the Text.

(1) Hugh Brooke Low was a member of the Sarawak Government Service from 1869 to 1887 (the year of his death). Most of his time was spent in the Third Division, of which he was Resident during the years 1885-87. He came to possess an expert knowledge of the language and customs of the Iban of the Third Division.

(2) *priok*, a cooking pot.

(3 H. Ling Roth, "The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo," London, 1896, Vol. 1, p. 390.

(4) The technique of pottery making employed by the Iban is of great antiquity. Pots of the same general type as those of the Iban and made by the same "beater and anvil" method are known from archaeological sites in Shantung, China, that date from the 7th century B.C. (Ref.: G. D. Wu, "Prehistoric Pottery in China," London, 1938, p. 37 seq., Fig. LXVII).

(5) cf. my "Iban Agriculture," pp. 18-19.

(6) Tukang spent most of his time with his indulgent grandmother—even when she was making pots. He can be seen, clinging to Runin's back, in Plate 4.

(7) Sir James Fraser, "The Golden Bough," Abridged Edition, London, 1932, p. 11.

(8) A. Morrison, "Murut Pottery", *Sarawak Museum Journal VI*, 1955 V. pp. 295-6.

(9) For the pen and ink drawings of Figures 1 and 2 (all of which are based on drawings made in the field) I am indebted to my wife, who also made various of the observations of which I have made use in this paper. The drawings at pp. 160-161 are not to exact scale, for the dimensions of a typical *penimba* see text.

(10) An Iban potter usually has a set of these *simpai*, varying in diameter, for the pots of different sizes that she makes. Runin's *simpai* were of the following diameters: 4 ins., 4¼ ins., 4½ ins., 4¾ ins., 5 ins., 5¼ ins. and 5½ ins.

(11) The variety of *rotan* used to make these rings is called by the Iban *wi rekong*.

(12) A pot which has reached this stage may be seen in the lower right hand corner of Plate 6.